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ABSTRACT

Political organization is an alternative to the so-called inevitability of losing one's rural school or one's small community: People United for Rural Education (P.U.R.E.), organized to promote the survival of rural schools and the concept of rural as a credible way of life, has been an effective political organization. The reversal of urban attitudes concerning rural schools and rural communities has become one of P.U.R.E.'s most difficult political tasks. Newspaper editorials have repeatedly seen rural schools as inefficient and inept and have called for school district reorganization to consolidate smaller school districts. The state-wide media have not been successful in influencing all Iowans and all state legislators with their printed propaganda because of politics and P.U.R.E., a political organization and a successful alternative. Since February of 1977, P.U.R.E. has grown in membership, in stature, and in the eyes of Iowa's legislative officers and educational specialists. Tremendous sacrifices have been required from P.U.R.E.'s lay leaders, lay membership, and professional Advisory Council. The key to a successful political organization is sacrifice. Additionally inherent within this key are endurance, esprit de corps, compromise, tenacity, re-evaluation, commitment, and faith. Rural people are a viable, credible, significant, vital, important and worthy minority. (CM)

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by Roger A. Baskerville, Ph.D.

A paper presented to the 1981 Rural Education Conference at Kansas State University - 16 November, 1981.

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My Dear Friends, Kansans, One-Worlders, Bigger is Better-ers, Demi-Gods and Other Functional Literates:

Thank you for that most gracious and platitudinal introduction. I was surprised that you could so easily decipher my handwriting.

Right now you're probably wondering why I've asked you all here today, and that's a fair question. Standing before you is the sacrificial lamb of 'Rural-dom.' I have been washed, bathed and ultimately covered in the blood of holy battle; the war of 'David and Goliath;' the battle of 'Urban vs. Rural;' the holocaust of 'Big against Small' and 'City vs. Country.' I have appeared before the Iowa Legislative Assembly and the Department of Public Instruction on numerous occasions. I have carried the banner of 'Rural Survival' and 'Rural Excellence' into these wars to end all wars with my head held high and my butt bruised and battered from the incessant pounding of countless hobnailed wingtips.

But have I quit? Have I surrendered the just cause of 'rural survival?' Have I hauled down the flag of agrarianism? Have I forked over the banner of 'small is great?' Have I sounded retreat? Have I turned my back on the political arena of this holy and just cause!?!? ...Damn right I have; at least a dozen times since my conversion as a rural advocate and indignant sufferer of urban pseudo-superiority almost five years ago. But each time I have sucked up the remaining flesh of my bloody gluteus maxi and returned to fight another day. The reason for this masochistic tendency? Simple: Rural and small schools are becoming increasingly visible.

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The attributes of these small centers of individualistic learning and teacher-to-student (singular, not plural) didacticism is now being heralded rather than hassled. And the reason for this increased credibility and viability? Once again, 'simple' is the keynote: Political organization. It is indeed an alternative to the so-called inevitability of losing one's rural school or one's small community.

Politics: That's what P.U.R.E. (People United for Rural Education) is all about. From 16 people with a common goal and purpose (the survival of our schools and the promotion of rural as a credible way of life) to 3,000 people with volunteer lobbyists in Des Moines and Washington, D.C. We have been effective. We have sponsored, and won, amendments to the financial formula. We have successfully assisted other 'special' interest groups in gaining legislative support. But for every time P.U.R.E. has succeeded, we have been rebuked and rebuffed and rebutted. Originally we argued back with good old fashioned 'emotion.' We cried 'identity!' They countered with 'is it good for the children?' We yelled 'motherhood!' They replied 'gender.' We shouted 'apple pie!' They implied 'sour grapes.' We have screamed 'but it isn't fair!' They have smirked 'objectivity.'

The reversal of these urban attitudes concerning rural schools and rural communities has become one of P.U.R.E.'s most difficult political tasks. Major mediums of news conveyance and editorialization are more often than not based in heavily populated, urban areas. It becomes easier for urban sources to relay the faults of rural areas since urbanites have the major media voice at their disposal. Rural people, inherently, do not have the same major voice of news/opinion/editorialization. Who, then, has the upper hand in formulating attitudes among all people, both rural and urban? People believe what they read; they believe what they hear. If rural citizens have lived with the constant media reminder that small is bad, inefficient, uneconomical,

resource poor, and, through inference, incomparable to urban-produced, urban-based models of all shapes and sizes, including education, then rural people, through no fault of their own, will start to believe what they read; and what they hear. Magnify and multiply urban-produced and induced attitudinal 'mind-sets' of several decades and generations, and those who are self-professed proponents of 'rural' as a way of credible, viable, and often-times superior lifestyles, do indeed face a monumental task in reversing well-established, urban-based attitudes.

Nowhere are these urban-based attitudes more evident than in the printed media. The so-called "inefficiency" and "ineptness" of rural schools has literally jumped off the pages of daily tabloids. I have collected some of these more prolific 'urban-based attitudes.' (It's really an easy hobby to keep up. All you have to do is subscribe to a daily 'big city' newspaper, buy a pair of scissors (dull, preferably) and start cutting!) For instance, from the December 25, 1976 Des Moines Register:

> A law requiring school districts in Iowa to have at least 1,000 students may be proposed to the Legislature next year as a means of forcing school reorganization... For years state education officials have been asking the Legislature to establish a state commission to consolidate smaller school districts into larger ones.

The Storm Lake Pilot-Tribune carried the following 'opinion' on March 14, 1977:

> Reorganization movements need to look down the road 20 years. ...It was a logical suggestion several years ago and an even more pertinent one now.

On January 20, 1978 the Des Moines Register carried the following front page story:

> ...In the state Senate, Senator Willard Hansen.., an advocate or reorganization, is chairman of the Schools Committee.
>
> "The minimum action I will settle for is the appointment of a commission to establish criteria by which reorganization can be brought about," said Hansen. "...I really don't see how people

> can objectively defend administrative units with enrollments in kindergarten through twelfth grade of under 500," he said.

The Omaha World-Herald published the following item on April 27, 1978:

> A budget study committee headed by (State Superintendent) Robert Benton two years ago recommended no Iowa district have less than 1,000 students, and he stuck to that figure Thursday, saying this would mean a high school of not less than 300.

The editorial page of the Des Moines Register added fuel to the 'attitudinal fires' when, anonymously, the following opinion was published on November 27, 1978 concerning "small-school problems:"

> If the Legislature allows tiny districts to continue, they should be provided with enough money to offer a good education. But it would be better - for taxpayers and students alike - to require reorganization into districts large enough to maintain an adequate high school curriculum at reasonable cost.

And, if an anonymous city editor didn't provide an attitudinal 'mind-set' by telling rural and urban readers alike what would be "better" for small district, rural taxpayers and students, the December 3, 1978 Register certainly clinched the prize for prejudicial editorializing in a news' story with the following 'choice of words' in a lead paragraph: "There is no need to slight gifted children in Iowa's small rural schools simply because the schools lack the resources to challenge youngsters."

In the January 7, 1979 Sunday edition of the Register an editorial entitled "What would they pay to keep their schools unconsolidated?" ran as the lead 'commentary' opinion for the day. The 'voice of authority' syndrome was evidenced in both the Register's printing of the opinion, and in the state-wide medium's choice of their editorializer, James Flansburg, a 'political' columnist.

> Part of the answer to the problem is consolidation of the smaller, high-cost districts. But that seems to be politically impossible. Small-town and rural voters get into such an uproar over the concept

> that some politicians will go to great lengths to avoid even mentioning the word "consolidation."
>
> In most of those small towns, the school is the center of community life. Virtually everything in town revolves around the school, and residents fear that consolidation would mean loss of the school and, therefore, loss of the town's identity.
>
> It hasn't worked that way in the places that have had sense enough to consolidate. It might be a good investment if the Legislature would establish a series of cultural exchanges - in the same way as the United States and China - to give those who fear consolidation a chance to go see for themselves that the towns where there has been consolidation haven't been changed that much.
>
> Matter of fact, in some places things are better now. I know of three towns - about five miles apart - where the residents usually speak to residents of the others nowadays because their kids go to school together. In my mind that proves there is hope for the Arabs and Jews and the Irish.

It now remains to examine the fodder, flotsam, jetsam and carnage of Iowa's rural schools since the first article cited appeared in print on December 25, 1976.

1) Was a law passed requiring K-12 districts to have a minimum of 1,000 students? No.

2) Was reorganization "forced" by the Legislature on Iowans? No.

3) Has the time come for the "logical suggestion" of reorganization? No.

4) Did the Iowa State Senator settle for the "minimum action" of the "appointment of a commission to establish criteria by which reorganization" could be "brought about?" No.

5) Did the "people" quit their objective defense of "administrative units with enrollment in kindergarten through twelfth grade of under 500?" No.

6) Does every high school in Iowa have a minimum of 300 students? No.

7) Did the Legislature eliminate "tiny districts?" Did the taxpayers buy the argument that only large districts offered a "good education?" Did rural Iowans buy

the opinionated concepts of "adequate high school curriculum" and "reasonable cost?" Did agrarians believe that rural "gifted children" were slighted "simply because the schools 'lacked' the resources to challenge youngsters?" Were the 'opinions' of an editorializer's 'big city mentality' bought hook, line and sinker? And, is there "hope for the Arabs and Jews and Irish?" The answers to these queries are simply,

8) Nope; no; huh-uh; negative; negatory; and that's a 'Big 10-4!'

Why haven't the state-wide mediums been successful in influencing all Iowans and all state legislators with their printed propaganda? The answer, once again, is (quite simply): Politics. Politics and P.U.R.E., a political organization and a successful alternative. Since February of 1977 People United for Rural Education has grown in membership, in stature, and in the eyes of Iowa's legislative officers and educational specialists. We have not let up. Oh, sure... There are times when we feel defeated; there are times when we walk away defeated. But we have always lived to fight another day and win a battle here and there. Has it been worth the sacrifice? Yes. We have preserved the essence and intended nature of 'quality' education; the small K-12 school.

Serving as P.U.R.E.'s State Advisor for three years has required great sacrifice. It has also required tremendous sacrifices from our lay leaders, our lay membership and our professional Advisory Council. In one word, that is the key to a successful political organization; sacrifice. You cannot succeed, you cannot move forward, you cannot achieve some of your objectives without it. Inherent within this 'key' belong (additionally) endurance, esprit de corps, compromise, tenacity, re-evaluation, commitment and faith. As faithful servants of P.U.R.E. we have all had to deal with reality as well as idealism. It took some time to realize that all our objectives would not be accomplished; not even a majority of our goals. During one year's

General Legislative Assembly we failed to realize the securing of even one major or minor objective for our small school, rural constituency. That hurt - admittedly. But when one works in the arena called 'politics,' one realizes that defeat (on any issue) is just around the corner. On the other hand, victory awaits those who patiently plod on, who endure, who are committed, and who continue to keep the faith. If one wants small schools to continue their new-found visibility, if one wants his or her political organization to become a 'successful' alternative, don't be discouraged by the inevitability of countless defeats; in other words, don't QUIT! There's a poem which hangs above the door to my office. In part it reads

> Success is failure turned inside out.
> So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit;
> It's when things seem worst that you mustn't quit -

For five years now I have been addressing Iowa's Legislature on problems affecting the survival of the 'quality' education inherent in our rural schools. I have used every angle, every tactic, every speaking ploy, style and technique known to man in order to reach these elected pillars of supposedly cold, objective indifference. On October 1 of this year I addressed the Joint Subcommittee of the Iowa Senate and House Committees on Education. My topic concerned the State School Foundation Formula and its ability to provide adequate funds for the school districts of Iowa. In desperation I tried a new approach at reaching the inner consciousness of Iowa's 'elected' educational policy makers. Believe it or not, they finally listened instead of just hearing politely. And, believe it or not, this is what I said. I share the following October 1 excerpts with you:

"In short, and in essense, I have tried desperately to get someone (anyone) to listen to me after they've taken the time and effort to invite me to these affairs. I have quoted educational and political authorities; I have utilized studies, graphs, charts, common snse, and (yes) even that most feared of all human attributes -

emotion. In fact, it suddenly dawned on me that I had used almost every speaking tactic and written form known to man. All, that is, except one; the Holy Bible. Please hear me out before I am convicted of mingling church and state. Micah, one of the few truely rural prophets in the Old Testament, and inspired by the Word of the Lord, stated: "Listen, you people who assemble in the city! ...your rich men exploit the poor, and all of you are liars." (6:9, 12) Now that was the Lord saying that through Micah, not through Baskerville. I'm merely reporting what I read. The Lord, however, must have liked small towns, because Micah continued, "Bethlehem..., you are one of the smallest towns in Judah, but out of you I will bring a ruler..." (5:2)

"Right after I made this discovery I was thumbing through the Good Book and the following passage jumped right out at me, and once again I swallowed my heart because the passage from Romans 13:1-2 literally voided all hope of my success here today. I quote: "Everyone must obey state authorities, because no authority exists without God's permission, and the existing authorities have been put there by God. Whoever opposes the existing authority opposes what God has ordered; and anyone who does so will bring judgment on himself." Wow! And if matters weren't bad enough, John $:44 really summarizes why none of you have ever listened to me: "A prjphet is not respected in his own country." Loosely translated that means you must travel at least 100 miles from home (with your briefcase) before you're listened to, and Lohrville is 90 miles from this Statehouse.

"I might also add that before you today there is the Third Year Report of Toward Community Growth: A Career Education Model for Iowa and Other Predominantly Rural States. This study explains the attempt (now proving successful) at improving "educational opportunities for rural students," and the stressing of "rural living values." Toward Community Growth was originally a federally-funded study designed

to promote Iowa (and other predominantly rural states) as a place to grow; to exhibit career options and opportunities to Iowa students rather than facing an incessant and annual 'brain drain' of our students. Why should we continue to lose the invested time, effort and money we have in these young men and women. Why not instill within them a sense of pride, a sense of belonging, a sense of place, a sense of values? If we manage to retain some of our students in the rural areas, and the rural areas ultimately show some growth or at least stabilization in demographic patterns, wouldn't this also benefit the so-called urban areas of this state? As I already mentioned, this is the third report authored on the Toward Community Growth project. How many are familiar with the first two studies? I guess the only answer lies in that previously cited: John 4:44.

"One final point, Committee: Since 1976 I have enjoyed only one year of the benefits of full allowable growth. That was the year my enrollment equled the previous year's count. During that period of time (1976-77 through 1981-82) the Lohrville Community School District has had a total allowable growth of 21.2 percent, or an average of 3.53 percent growth per year. I just learned Tuesday that my 'new' money for 1982-83 will be .8 of one percent. Since my enrollment was two students higher in 1981 over 1980, I was counting on some allowable growth, but this (.8 of one percent) this is absurd! Surely the Comptroller's Office had made a mistake in the formulation and utilization of the General Fund and Levy Worksheet. I hurriedly called the Comptroller's Office and (just as I had feared) found out the .8 of one percent was true. I guess I had hoped that the Legislature, in all their infinite wisdom would have allowed for, and accordingly adjusted, the 'magic formula' budget enrjllment adjustment from last year so that the full shock wouldn't have been felt. What really burned me was that the Comptroller's Office tried to tell me that I

should feel great about the .8 of one percent new money because the formula gave me more last year than I deserved. I told him, analogously, that 'I should be happy with crippling polio since it isn't terminal cancer?' He told me that the inefficient districts and their constituents would now see that reorganization was the only answer on an economy of scale. I told him (as I've told thousands of people since becoming State Advisor of P.U.R.E.) that once again the public was being hoodwinked by thinking that the 'effect' (the results of the Iowa School Financial Formula) was really something that couldn't be overcome, and that it reflected an unbiased economy of scale which displayed the inefficiency of management during times of declining enrollment. Nuts. The real culprit is not the 'effect,' the real antagonist is the 'cause,' that the Iowa School Financial Formula even exists. There is no way to beat it; it will either get you in the end, and/or in the end it will get you. I told the Comptroller's Office that my District could foot the whole educational bill (inclusive of state aid) and still get by cheaper than if reorganization was forced on us. And if you want documented facts and figures, we can trot them out of the stables 'one more time.' What concerns me the most is that attitudes like the one exhibited in the Comptroller's Office could permeate the entire state bureaucracy. I've been to Des Moines. I've observed you 'efficiency(?)' first hand; how many of you have been to Lohrville to observe (first hand) our efficiency. Using the same economy of scale for Lohrville and Des Moines is like comparing your grandmother's army boots with a ton-and-a-half of bullfeathers. I suppose some similarities (comparatively) could be drawn by stretching an already overtaxed imagination, but really now; just how gullible do you think we are? Our redneck is not a byproduct of gamma rays; it's the product of increasing anger! As long as there is breath in this body you'll never get me (hence my constituents) to buy that eschatological argument that the effect is unavoidable and that we must live with it. Army boots and bullfeathers aside, it's the 'cause' that produces our apostasy

from confidence in state government. When will you learn that we ineffectual, rural rednecks have finally figured that one out?!?"

That's it. That's what I said. That's what I told the Des Moines' bureaucrats. Will it take hold this time? Do you think they finally listened? I've had more positive feedback this time then I ever had before, but only time will tell. If not, we'll just drop back 15 yards and punt again. Only... this time I'd like to dropkick those city sinners right through the goalposts of life!

In closing, I want to remind you that Rural people are indeed, a viable, credible, significant, vital, important and worthy minority. If you don't believe that, you're wasting your time at this conference. Take issue with those who define "Rural" as "non-urban." Say to them that Rural is,

> ...of, or relating to, a minority group of people who habitate in sparsely populated areas, and are identified by a unique persistence to retain their customs, culture and individuality in all aspects of a human, spiritual, social, economic and educational nature.

And then turn to your detractors and/or adversaries with the following post-script:

> I do whole-heartedly endorse the definition of 'urban,' however, as 'non-rural.'

Thank you.

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